

July 15, 2003

Committee on Education and the Workforce
United States House of Representatives
218 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Colleague:

As the state elected and appointed officials charged with the supervision, implementation, and leadership of education and human services programs in Montana we have been asked to offer our perspective regarding the recent proposed changes to the 38 year old Head Start program.

As you know, Head Start is one of those special programs that help strengthen both the present and the future. We appreciate the efforts to improve the delivery of services to our pre-Kindergarten children; it shows that the children of Montana and the United States are on your mind. As this reauthorization moves through the Congress we very much appreciate that critical steps have been made to improve the legislation. However, there are some points regarding rural programs that must be analyzed.

While Montana is not eligible to become a demonstration state that could enact some of those proposed changes, we still feel it is necessary to present a rural state's perspective of how the other proposed changes would affect this very important program. We have convened a group of local Head Start directors, statewide association leaders, and government administrators to outline their observations of HR 2210, the legislation reauthorizing Head Start.

The first area of concern is the possible exacerbation of Montana's staggering teacher shortage. Like many rural states, Montana is experiencing an extreme teacher shortage at all levels of education. With the proposed changes many Head Start educators would become qualified for elementary teacher licensure and ultimately leave a Head Start position or Montana altogether for increased benefits and salary. We are striving to ensure that a highly qualified teacher is in front of every Head Start class by implementing a new early childhood undergraduate degree

in Montana. This solution will not exacerbate our teacher shortage.

The next concern is a possible emphasis shift toward academic instruction and away from comprehensive services. By utilizing a comprehensive curriculum, Head Start programs across Montana do an excellent job of preparing our underprivileged children for life in kindergarten and beyond. Montana is taking great strides to increase collaboration between our elementary schools and early childhood learning. Knowing that the transition from Head Start to kindergarten can be difficult, we feel that a complete education that not only prepares a child academically but also socially, physically, and emotionally is critical to a successful life of learning. We are confident that our collaboration will ensure this broad focus is preserved.

Montana would also like to express a desire to extend and expand the amount of communication with our American Indian Head Start Programs. These areas of Montana have unique challenges and exceptional needs that demand attention. Specifically in the areas of accountability and teacher quality, collaboration and communication between the federal government and tribal entities can ensure the children of these areas are successful.

While we understand there is no new testing contained within HR 2210, increased reliance on current assessment is a topic of conversation. The concern is the trend dealing with accountability and its relationship to testing. There are Montanans that are concerned that there are many problems related to small populations that can develop in rural settings that would punish some programs and many students with skewed test results. It is our understanding that local Head Start directors are effectively utilizing the current tests to elevate student achievement and preparedness.

We also feel it is important to address the issue of funding. While the funding increase in the bill is appreciated, it will be difficult to implement some new portions of the legislation without commensurate financial resources. We would like to see more children educated but not at the expense of the high level of quality the current students receive. It is also very important that technical assistance be provided to ensure that new initiatives, especially regarding new educators, are enacted with adequate resources.

Finally, we would also like to address the issues surrounding the possibility of future state control of Head Start nationwide. We would like to emphasize that strong national standards for teacher qualifications, adequate funding, a comprehensive program services curriculum and an effective in state pre-Kindergarten structure are critical to the exploration of future nationwide state control of Head Start. But without a foundation to meet those same standards any other state management of Head Start could be detrimental to the students. It would also open the door to many issues surrounding adequacy of funds and equity of services. While we understand that some duplication of effort exists, the utmost caution must be exercised prior to moving beyond demonstration states.

The intent of the changes to Head Start contained within this reauthorization are positive but rural states lack the infrastructure, resources, and personnel to make some of these changes at this time. While accountability is noble, the true intent of President Johnson's vision of valuing the education of the whole child as well as emphasizing prevention of problems rather than punishment for them has been very important to so many children.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. The legislation, while well intentioned, may not have the best interests of rural Head Start programs at heart. We are more than willing to work with you to find ways to ensure that Montana's pre-Kindergarten students are well prepared for school. Please feel free to contact any of us at any time.

Sincerely,

JUDY MARTZ
Governor

LINDA MCCULLOCH
Superintendent of Public Instruction

GAIL GRAY

Director of Public Health and Human Services

CHRISTY HILL LARSON

Director of Montana Head Start Association

KIRK MILLER

Chairman of Montana Board of Public Education